

"A Place of Hope"

1 Sam. 16; Micah 5; Isaiah 11

Covid continues to wreak havoc amongst us we get closer to Christmas. We are doing our best to celebrate the birth of Jesus and be with family as best we can but we know Christmas will not be the same this year. Even kids know it as is reflected in their letters to Santa. Listen to some of these letters written this year to Santa:

"Dear Santa," writes Kaden in California, "I would do anything if you could some-haw restart 5th grade with NO Covid. so plees if you the amasing Santa could restart it I wood be happy"

Lilly, a sixth grader from Maine, wrote:

"I have not had a good year," "My grandpa died and I could not see him because of covid. I miss him and his big hugs. Santa can you bring grammy a puppy so she is not so lonely?" she added.

13-year-old Raymond confessed he "is not a believer," he still asked Santa for gifts in order to help out his mom. "I am asking you to help my mom for X-mas. Having us all home and not working due to covid we could use some help."

People are looking for hope right now. Hope to be with family for Christmas. Hope to get back to work. Hope for Covid to go away, for the vaccine to work and a return to life as we know it. But if all we're hoping for is virus free world, we are placing our hope in the wrong things and the wrong people. Even the best scientists and government leaders and health care providers can only improve our circumstances, not offer us real hope for the heart, soul and mind. So where do we turn to for hope? God sent us hope in the form of His Son to a little town called Bethlehem. As we've been tracing the experiences that Scripture teaches us from Bethlehem, we've walked with Jacob through the sorrow of the death of Rachel but the renaming of their son to be Benjamin, meaning place of honour. We then watched how Elimelech left Bethlehem with his wife Naomi and two sons because of a famine – a sign of judgment from God on the land because of Israel's disobedience – only to find that his own disobedience of not trusting God resulted in his and his sons deaths. His sons disobeyed God's Word which says don't marry non Jewish women.

And yet God reversed Naomi's sorrow and restored her and Ruth, her daughter in law and sister in faith, as they returned to Bethlehem. There Ruth meets Boaz, a relative of Elimelech's and becomes her kinsman redeemer, marries her, sacrificing his own inheritance and saving Elimelech's. God restores him (who was Rahab the harlot's son) and through them they become the great grandparents of David, son of Jesse.

But in between that time, Israel still is disobeying God. As we open the pages of 1 Samuel we encounter the judge of Israel, Eli and his two wicked sons who use the priesthood to feed their bellies and satisfy their lusts. But God is always at work and a distraught, childless woman named Hannah prays for a son, offering to give him in service to God. Eli is the witness of this prayer. God answers. Samuel is born and eventually dropped off on Eli's doorstep to raise as a priest. God raises Samuel up to be more than a priest but also judge and prophet.

But Samuel himself has two wicked sons and the people want a 'king like the nations'. Samuel objects but God allows it and says 'Give the people what they want'. They choose Saul who showed some promise initially but eventually we see that he has little if any faith in God and doesn't heed the authority of Samuel nor the words of God. At the end of 1 Sam. 15, God has torn away the kingdom from Saul. Samuel grieves over the failure of Saul perhaps because he feels personally responsible but also possibly because he knows from God's history with the Judges that Israel's failure to obey always results in defeat or famine.

So when we're in the place like Samuel where ...

We've Temporarily Lost Hope

... God points us to Bethlehem. Why Bethlehem? Why this little, ordinary, rural town surrounded by rich farm land with the sound of bleating sheep? Because God chooses the Bethlehem's of the world to be places from which hope will rise. God speaks to Samuel:

How long will you mourn for Saul, since I have rejected him as king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil and be on your way; I am sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem. I have chosen one of his sons to be king."

² But Samuel said, "How can I go? Saul will hear about it and kill me." The LORD said, "Take a heifer with you and say, 'I have come to sacrifice to the LORD.' ³ Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what to do. You are to anoint for me the one I indicate."

⁴ Samuel did what the LORD said.

Even prophets get down at times. Samuel grieved over Saul. But God wasn't going to judge Israel, instead He tells Samuel to get up, fill your horn with oil and go to Bethlehem because God is going to choose His King now. See, God didn't judge Israel here for their disobedience – which Samuel may have been expecting - because He already judged them. They weren't walking with God when they asked for 'a king like the nations'. So God gave them exactly what they wanted as its own source of judgment. They reaped from what they sowed.

Samuel temporarily lost hope because his hope was in a person not God. God speaks to Samuel and tells him how to move forward when you've temporarily lost hope because your focus is off God. 'Go to Bethlehem because I am still in control and I have a better king in mind for a particular reason.' So Samuel

Listens and obeys God's Word (vv.1-5)

When our hope has been temporarily disrupted because our eyes are off God, go back to His Word and do what His Word says. We temporarily lose hope because we're not really listening to God. God already told Samuel he had someone else in mind and Samuel told Saul this very thing way back in Ch. 13 when Saul impatiently sacrificed the burnt offering before Samuel's arrival. Samuel told Saul what God was going to do:

You acted foolishly," Samuel said. "You have not kept the command the LORD your God gave you; if you had, he would have established your kingdom over Israel for all time. ¹⁴ But now your kingdom will not endure; the LORD has sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him leader of his people, because you have not kept the LORD's command."

But let's cut Samuel some slack because we all forget God's Word when what we hoped would be God's plan failed. Go back to God's Word. Listen and do what it says, trust in His promises and pray for His timing to fulfil them.

Samuel goes and meets Jesse. Jesse brings the first of his seven sons and Samuel, judging by appearance thinks 'Yes, I can see that Eliab would make a good king.' But that was the same criteria for choosing Saul! Like Samuel when our hope is temporarily lost and we feel God is moving us forward,

Be patient as you wait on God (vv.6-10)

Just because we do what God says or go where we sense He's leading, doesn't mean it's all going to work out immediately and perfectly.

Wait. Trust.

Jesse goes through his first 7 sons – none of whom God chooses. Samuel knows he is supposed to go to Jesse so he asked the obvious question 'Do you have any more sons?' 'Yeah but, he's just the kid'. So they send for the youngest out tending the sheep. He is ruddy (means red, red haired) and good looking. And God says, he's the one. The youngest, the eighth son. The one dad didn't think worth inviting to the feast. We haven't even been told his name yet until v.13

So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers, and from that day on the Spirit of the LORD came upon David in power. Samuel then went to Ramah.

Everyone is surprised. And Samuel goes home. And it's going to be 15 or more years before David actually becomes king. When we've lost hope and focus and trying to get back to God, we listen to His Word and leading, we obey whatever it is He says to do, we wait patiently for His direction but

Don't underestimate the 'small' works of God (vv.11-13)

Samuel obeyed God. Anointed David. The Spirit came upon him. But nothing changed for quite some time. God works in stages. He's weaving a tapestry. His map is the world and His timeline is in years not days. God moved the heart of a Moab girl to believe in Him. God moved the heart of a prostitute to trust Him and side with His people. He brings her son and the Moabite together. They have a son, who has a son, who has a son named Jesse who has 8 sons and the last one is David. All of which takes place in Bethlehem.

And David does well for quite some time and does love God with His heart. But he is human and sins in many ways. He loses the kingdom to his son Absalom for a bit but regains it. Yet not with the same power and control as he once had. Sin has its consequences. Yet God promises His line will be the blessed kingly line through which the Messiah would come. And his son Solomon starts out well but also blows it. And so do all their descendants eventually. Then God sends prophets – like Micah and Isaiah - and tells Israel they will lose their kingdom and their king for quite some time; longer than they would have ever anticipated. Because of their sin they will no longer be the controlling power in the world. A world that will turn to other gods and try to bring you down. A world where

Our Enemies will 'Appear' to be Stronger

(Micah 4:11-5:4; Is. 11)

What does God tell His people to do when those who oppose Him seem to be stronger than Him and in control of this world? God says look to Bethlehem and there your hope will be renewed.

We just went through the book of Micah last month so a quick review. Both Micah and Isaiah prophesied at the same time before, during and after the Assyrians took the northern kingdom of Israel away, leaving them to preach to the Southern kingdom, warning them that Babylon would do the same to them if they didn't repent. Neither Micah nor Isaiah lived long enough to see that day but they prophesied about it and also about Israel's immediate future of return from exile yet also about the distant future of the reign of the Son of David, the Messiah.

In Micah 4, Micah is pointing out the many blessings that Israel will experience when the Messiah returns and establishes His Millennial rule on earth; 1000 years of Jesus being in control of this earth. Yet at the time, the Southern Kingdom was under the godless rule of Hezekiah's son Manasseh (who would repent late in life, but the spiritual and moral damage was done). And so God sends prophets to encourage God's people that even though the enemy looks like he's in control, God is always in charge. Look at 4:11

¹¹ *But now many nations are gathered against you. They say, "Let her be defiled, let our eyes gloat over Zion!"* ¹² *But they do not know the thoughts of the LORD; they do not understand his plan, he who gathers them like sheaves to the threshing floor.*

¹³ *"Rise and thresh, O Daughter of Zion, for I will give you horns of iron; I will give you hoofs of bronze and you will break to pieces many nations." You will devote their ill-gotten gains to the LORD, their wealth to the Lord of all the earth. 5:1 Marshal your troops, O city of troops, for a siege is laid against us. They will strike Israel's ruler on the cheek with a rod.*

In His sovereign plan God allows the nations (and the Enemy) temporary victories over God's people. Sometimes for disciplinary purposes but other times for reasons we're unsure. But we must remember

Don't judge the future by the present (4:11-5:1)

Notice Micah's method. He describes the future blessings and glories of the Millennial kingdom and then in v.11 he returns to their present suffering "But now many nations are gathered against you". Jesus hasn't returned yet and it may not be for a little while. So how do we remain hopeful? He reminds us of the promises of God and he points us to Bethlehem:

² *"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."*

³ *Therefore Israel will be abandoned until the time when she who is in labor gives birth and the rest of his brothers return to join the Israelites.*

⁴ *He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth.*

At one time their hero, David, came from Bethlehem. They enjoyed their greatest victories and time of peace and blessing under his and his son Solomon's reign. But that all fell apart. So God says through Micah, let's go back to Bethlehem and start over. That small, rural town south of big city Jerusalem. And notice the typical prophecies about Jesus' birth and future rule are often mentioned in the same verses. Here's why:

Every fulfilled prophecy reminds us every future prophecy will be fulfilled (5:2-5)

Was Jesus born in Bethlehem? Yes.

Did the Jewish people and even religious leaders believe in the literalness of this verse? Yes.

Then we can believe in the literalness of the future promises of Jesus' reign on earth. Isaiah, Micah's contemporary, also pointed us to Bethlehem for hope when our enemies appear to be in control. Go to Isaiah 11,

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.

² *The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD—³ and he will delight in the fear of the LORD. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears;*
⁴ *but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.⁵ Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist.*

The 'stump' of Jesse' indicates the line of Jesse will be cut off at some point. Indeed God told King Jehoiachin, a descendant of David, that he would never have a descendant on the throne of Israel. He was the last physical Davidic king to rule Israel when Babylon captured the Southern Kingdom and took them into exile. But God wasn't done with David's line. Joseph and Mary came through a different part of David's line thus ensuring the Messiah's coming. Jesus is the 'shoot' and the branch' that grew from the chopped down tree, left for dead but God had other plans. Jesus is the branch, in Hebrew nazer, and He would grow up in Nazareth (branch town). And the Spirit of the Lord **IS** on Him and He will not only be all these things but He **IS** all these things. Here's another anchor when we're feeling hopeless,

Jesus never changes (11:1-3a)

As our resurrected Lord and the eternal Son of God, Jesus has the Spirit dwelling in Him and is full of wisdom, understanding, counsel, power, knowledge and the fear of the Lord. He will return and rule one day in the Millennium and dole out fair and accurate decisions. We know this isn't talking about eternity because eternity is perfect and sinless. No one will disobey Him then. There won't be a need for justice then. But we can trust Him that one day

Jesus will handle all judgment (vv.3b-5)

Jesus told the Jewish religious leaders in John 5:27

²⁷ *And he [the Father] has given him [Jesus] authority to judge because He is the Son of Man.*

When we feel hopeless, when we feel as if we can't win and the enemy always seems to have the upper hand look to Bethlehem. The past birth of Jesus assures the future return of Jesus. The past life of Jesus assures the future reign of Jesus. The past resurrection of Jesus assures the future judgment from Jesus.

Isaiah prophecies that the one born from Jesse's almost cut off line will one day rule the world. And he writes from vv.6 to the end of the chapter about what the Millennium will be like; peace, harmony, abundance – and that's on this physical not perfect yet world. Satan will try and disrupt that

when he's released from the Abyss (Rev. 20) but Jesus will deal with him swiftly and once for all send him to the lake of fire. This guarantees that

Future peace is a reality for God's people (vv.6-16)

And we have to cling to these promises because we may not feel much peace on earth right now. That we're not seeing the light at the end of this Covid tunnel or whatever difficult circumstances you're finding yourself in right now. But every Christmas we celebrate the fulfillment of prophecy when Jesus came in the flesh born in a rural village not much bigger than Westport. Bethlehem gives us hope.

One of the most practical thing Jesus ever said was

"Don't worry about tomorrow for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own." [Matt. 6:34].

So Jesus only expects us to live for God's glory by faith one day at a time. His mercies and grace come new daily, to give us the spiritual resources to handle today, today. If we do that then the hopelessness that surrounds us, won't swallow us. Instead, we renew ourselves in His hope giving Word each day. We pray for fresh eyes of faith to see His goodness in the world around us. And we point a few people today to look to Him for hope and encouragement and eternal life. Let the nativity sets around you remind you that hope came in the hay. That God's Word always comes true and that if Jesus is in control of the future then he's in control of today.

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